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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that the problem of the at-risk, low-achieving student lies at least in part with staff attitudes, the Special Populations Project at Research for Better Schools developed a survey instrument to measure staff attitudes and perceptions. The "Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey" includes nine scales: Classroom Management, Instruction, Parent Involvement, Principal Leadership, School Climate, School Programs, Staff Development, Student Involvement in Learning, and Teacher Expectations. To complete the survey, respondents rate their opinion or experience using a five-point Likert scale on the 228 individual items. The survey was field tested with 228 school staff from four nonurban schools in the mid-Atlantic region. When items with correlations below .50 were eliminated the items across the nine scales were reduced to 177. In interpreting the average mean score for each scale, lower scores reflect areas of higher need. Computed means for the nine scales ranged from 2.6 for Parent Involvement to 3.5 for Classroom Management. Overall staff perceived relatively more need in four areas, Parent Involvement, School Climate, Student Involvement in Learning, and Staff Development. Comparisons of individual school profiles indicate high consistency across the four schools except that elementary school teachers identified Principal Leadership as a top priority. The document concludes that this staff survey is a reliable instrument for prioritizing perceived staff needs for support in addressing the population of nonurban students at risk for poor academic achievement or failure. (DHP)

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Addressing the "At-Risk" Challenge in the Nonurban Setting

by

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Background

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our educational system threatens to put the future of our nation at risk. The Commission declared that our society and its educational institutions had gone soft and no longer encouraged the type of disciplined effort necessary to achieve academic excellence.

While the National Commission on Excellence and others (e.g., the Committee for Economic Development, 1985; the Education Commission of the States, 1983; the National Science Board, 1983) were calling for an upgrade in the quality of education, some (e.g., Levin, 1986; Smith & Hester, 1985) were focusing on the failure of our nation's schools to meet the needs of urban youth who are falling behind in school and are at risk of not graduating. In the opinion of this second group, the effects of the new educational crusade, with its emphasis on a more rigorous curriculum and higher standards, would be to create additional barriers to high school completion for at-risk students without providing the resources and assistance needed to meet these new standards.

The problem of the at-risk student is often perceived as an urban one, since these students are frequently in the majority in inner city schools (Houston, 1987). However, statistics show that the number of students in nonurban schools needing remediation is, in many cases, comparable to the number in urban schools. For example, in New Jersey, the 1986 High School Proficency Test (HSPT) scores indicate that approximately 15,000 urban as compared to 16,000 nonurban ninth graders failed one or more parts of the test (New Jersey Department of Education, 1985-1986). Similarly, in Pennsylvania, the results of the 1986 Test of Essential

Learning and Literacy Skills (TELLS) show that significantly more nonurban students than urban are eligible for remediation in reading and mathematics at all three grade levels tested (i.e., third, fifth and eighth grades) (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1986).

One conclusion to be drawn from test data such as these is that while nonurban schools may be successfully educating a large proportion of their students, they are not meeting the needs of a significant number who are performing below accepted academic standards for success. Several factors can account for this finding. In nonurban schools, at-risk students are frequently the forgotten minority. Their poor performance is masked by school and district averages and there is little public pressure exerted on their behalf. And, within these schools, it appears that teachers are more skilled in educating average or above-average students and resources are targeted on these more successful groups.

In order to increase educational effectiveness for at-risk, low achieving students in the nonurban school setting, teachers need an increased awareness of these students' needs and of the inadequacies in their instructional programs for meeting those needs. Also, teachers must be provided with information on effective teaching strategies and behaviors for instructing low achieving students in heterogeneous academic environments.

This paper describes an effort by the Special Populations project at Research for Better Schools to assist educators in addressing the needs of at-risk, low achieving students in nonurban schools. The low achieving target population includes students, grades K-12, who are not meeting minimum standards of academic achievement or success as determined by state-administered tests and/or locally imposed standards. Nonurban districts are those so designated by the state governing bodies (Houston, 1987).

This effort is based on the assumption that the problem of the at-risk, low achieving student lies at least in part with staff attitudes, perceptions and/or behaviors. Accordingly, two steps are being taken: the first is the development of an assessment instrument that is capable of measuring staff attitudes and perceptions; and the second is the development of support materials that can be used to change these attitudes and perceptions, as necessary.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the pilot test of the assessment instrument, the Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey. This instrument focuses on the problems of low achievers in schools where these students are in the minority. Pilot activities included selecting items, and field testing and revising the instrument.

Support materials, referred to as resource documents, are currently being developed. These materials are designed to provide research-based information corresponding to the items on the assessment instrument.

Methodology

The construction of the Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey was based on a thorough review of educational research and literature on at-risk, low achieving students. The survey's nine scales were selected on the basis of (1) the availability of research to support the scale as being an important influence on the achievement of these students, and (2) the possibility that the scale represents a variable that is alterable at the local school level. The nine scales include: Classroom Management, Instruction, Parent Involvement, Principal Leadership, School Climate, School Programs, Staff Development, Student Involvement in Learning, and Teacher Expectations.

To help ensure content validity, content domains were defined for each scale and available research was systematically reviewed in terms of these domains. Two hundred twenty-eight representative items were constructed. Eight of the the nine scales were represented by from 22 to 27 items; the remaining scale, Instruction, had a greater number of items (39) as it covered two related areas, instruction and thinking skills.

The survey is designed to be used with school staff to assess their perceptions as to whether certain research-based behaviors are occurring in their school. In completing the survey, respondents are asked to rate their opinion or experience, using a 5-point Likert scale, on the 228 items associated with the nine scales. The rating options range from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). Responses are recorded on a separate answer sheet for machine scoring.

Each of the nine survey scales is to have a corresponding support product or resource document as a means of implementing specific strategies to exploit identified opportunities for improving education for this special population. The resource documents will provide a review of research in the problem area, teaching implications, and examples of successful strategies and programs.

The survey was field tested with 228 school staff (faculty and administrators) from four nonurban schools in the Mid-Atlantic region: a Delaware middle school (grades five and six) (N=48), a Maryland elementary school (N=30), a New Jersey high school (N=88), and a Pennsylvania high school (N=62). In all cases, school administrators volunteered their staff's participation; in three of the four schools staff participation was mandatory (in the fourth school 56 percent of the staff volunteered).

The field test was conducted in the four schools during the spring of 1987. The elementary school and middle school staff completed the survey during in-school sessions, which ranged from 40 to 70 minutes. The staff from the two high schools completed the survey on their own time. In all cases, the survey was administered in an anonymous and confidential manner. Completed answer sheets and surveys were returned in sealed envelopes to Research for Better Schools for analysis.

Findings

Two steps were taken to determine the reliability of the survey instrument. First, correlations between individual item scores and scale scores were examined and items with low correlations (below .50) were eliminated. This resulted in a reduction of the number of items across the nine scales to 177. Second, coefficient alpha (α) was computed to determine the internal consistency of the piloted and then reduced scales. These coefficients for the final or reduced scales are reported in Table 1.

The average mean score for each of the survey's nine scales, portrayed in Table 2, was computed to determine staff perceptions as to whether the research-based strategies are being implemented. These data were also to be used for determining the sequence for developing support materials or resource documents. In interpreting the means, lower scores reflect areas of higher need; that is, the lower the mean, the less staff perceive that the research-based strategies referred to in that scale are being implemented in their school.

As indicated in Table 2, the computed means for the nine scales ranged from 2.6 (Parent Involvement) to 3.5 (Classroom Management). An analysis of the frequency distribution of responses for each of the nine scales

Table 1

α and Number of Items in Revised Scales

Scale	α	No. of Items
Classroom Management	.89	14
Instruction	.94	27
Parent Involvement	.93	19
Principal Leadership	.95	22
School Climate	.91	16
School Programs	.88	16
Staff Development	.94	21
Student Involvement in Learning	.93	22
Teacher Expectations	.93	20

indicates that these means do not reflect high percentages of neutral or "3" responses (the mean percent of responses in this category, for all nine scales, was only 16), but rather a near balance between positive (Agree) and negative (Disagree) responses.

A second finding is that, overall, staff perceived relatively more need in four areas, Parent Involvement, School Climate, Student Involvement in Learning, and Staff Development. Each of these received a mean rating of less than 3.0.

Third, comparisons of individual school profiles indicate a high level of consistency across the four schools. The elementary school, middle school and high schools had similar patterns in terms of their top priorities, although the range of means for the middle school and one high school (PA) was somewhat lower than the range for the elementary school and the second high school (NJ). One exception to this pattern is the finding

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey

Pilot Group	Scale: Classroom Management	Instruction	Parent Involvement	Principal Leadership	School Climate	School Programs	Staff Development	Student Involvement in Learning	Teacher Expectations
Elementary School (N=30)	3.8	3.7	3.0	3.1	3.3	3.1	3.0	3.4	3.8
Middle School (N=48)	3.2	3.3	2.5	3.2	2.5	2.8	2.8	2.6	3.1
PA High School (N=62)	3.4	3.4	2.4	3.0	2.3	2.8	2.6	2.4	3.4
NJ High School (N=88)	3.6	3.7	2.8	3.5	2.9	3.4	2.9	3.0	3.5
TOTAL (N=228)	3.5	3.5	2.6	3.3	2.7	3.1	2.8	2.8	3.4

that Principal Leadership, rather than Student Involvement in Learning, was a top priority for the elementary school. In the middle school and high schools Student Involvement in Learning was one of the top five priorities.

Discussion

This paper reports on an effort to assist educators in meeting the needs of at-risk, low achieving students in nonurban schools. Specifically, it describes the piloting of an instrument, the Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey, designed to measure staff attitudes and perceptions. The internal consistency of the assessment instrument, following revisions based on the pilot, is at a desirable level and lends support to the content validity. The pilot also points out some interesting findings in terms of staff perceptions related to the implementation of research-based strategies in each of the survey's nine areas.

The pilot indicates a need for some support in each of the survey's nine areas. Moreover, staff identified those areas of most need as being areas in which they seem to have least control (e.g., Parent Involvement, School Climate, Staff Development) and areas of least need as those in which they seem to have more direct control (e.g., Classroom Management, Instruction, Teacher Expectations). Interestingly, Student Involvement in Learning, which emphasizes student characteristics, is also a relatively high priority area. Perhaps this is viewed by teachers as an area over which they have relatively little control.

Two alternative explanations for the priority rankings are: first, staff awareness may be higher in certain areas, such as Instruction and Teacher Expectations, as a result of receiving more support and training in

those areas; and second, perhaps this pattern results from teachers externalizing their problem in dealing with low achieving students. This is a viable hypothesis in light of a common attitude among some school staff when faced with the challenge of educating this special population; that is, the problem and its solution are within this small group of students, rather than under the control of their own strategies and behaviors.

Finally, there was general agreement in staff perceptions across the elementary, middle and high schools. The major exception, which was the priority of Principal Leadership at the elementary level, may be accounted for by the fact that this school was experiencing a turnover in leadership. Although this finding of consistency is based on a small sample, it may be relevant for school districts in their planning for staff development. Perhaps the content for school improvement efforts can be similar across grade levels. More research is needed in support of this finding.

In summary, significant numbers of nonurban students are not meeting state and local criteria for academic achievement or success. The Assessment of School Needs for Low Achieving Students: Staff Survey represents a reliable instrument for prioritizing perceived staff needs for support in addressing this special population. It remains to be seen if the support materials being developed can be used to change attitudes and perceptions related to these needs.

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